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Barr Eyes Ex-White House Lawyer for Top Justice Department Post

Claire Murray jumped from the White House to Attorney General William Barr's front office. She's eyed now for principal deputy associate attorney general.

By C. Ryan Barber | April 04, 2019

U.S. Attorney General William Barr is considering Claire Murray, a former White House lawyer who recently joined his staff, for a top Justice Department role overseeing civil litigation, including the defense of Trump administration policies, according to three people familiar with the matter.



William Barr testifies before the Senate Judiciary Committee during his confirmation hearing to be U.S. attorney general on Jan. 15, 2019. Credit: Diego M. Radzinschi / NLJ

Murray, among a small group **of Barr advisers** (<https://www.law.com/nationallawjournal/2019/03/01/william-barr-fills-front-office-with-trump-white-house-lawyers/>) who previously worked in the Trump White House counsel's office, is expected to succeed Jesse Panuccio as the principal deputy associate attorney general, a role that has taken on new prominence as the Trump administration has struggled to fill the third-ranking Justice Department position.

Indeed, the Justice Department has been without a Senate-confirmed associate attorney general since Rachel Brand resigned in February 2018 to become a top lawyer at Walmart. Panuccio, a **former partner** (<https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/4388406/Jesse-Michael-Panuccio-Financial-Disclosure.pdf>) at Foley & Lardner in Miami who was previously a lawyer for Sen. Ted Cruz's presidential campaign, served as acting associate attorney general in early 2017 as Brand awaited confirmation. He later reprised the role in the months after her resignation.

As acting associate attorney general, Panuccio oversaw the department's antitrust, civil rights, civil and tax divisions, among other components.

It is unclear whether Panuccio would leave the Justice Department if Murray moves into the principal deputy position. Although Panuccio is seen as likely to leave Main Justice, sources said Barr is pleased with his work and that it is possible he would remain at the department in a different position.

A Justice Department representative declined to comment Thursday. Panuccio and Murray did not respond to messages seeking comment.

The anticipated maneuvering comes just weeks after Murray **joined** (<https://www.law.com/nationallawjournal/2019/03/01/william-barr-fills-front-office-with-trump-white-house-lawyers/>) Barr's staff as an adviser in his front office, capping a two-year tenure in the Trump White House. Before joining the Trump administration, she had been a partner at Kirkland & Ellis, the law firm **where Barr**

worked (<https://www.law.com/nationallawjournal/2019/01/14/kirklands-bill-barr-reports-1-2m-firm-income-on-disclosure-for-ag/>) up until his nomination in December to lead the Justice Department.

Murray had previously clerked for Justice Samuel Alito and for now-Justice Brett Kavanaugh when he was a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit. At the White House, Murray helped guide Kavanaugh through his bitter confirmation fight.

The Trump administration has been frustrated in its quest to install a new associate attorney general.



Jessie Liu, U.S. attorney for Washington, D.C., speaking at Main Justice in 2017. Credit: Bloomberg

Jessie Liu, the top federal prosecutor in Washington, **withdrew from consideration (<https://www.law.com/nationallawjournal/2019/03/28/jessie-liu-withdraws-from-consideration-for-no-3-post-at-main-justice/>)** last week after Sen. Mike Lee, the Utah Republican, questioned her past affiliation with the National Association of Women

Lawyers. Liu's links to the lawyers' group raised questions among Republicans about her stance on abortion rights and conservative bona fides, according to people familiar with the scuttled nomination.

As her nomination came under threat, Liu sought to distance herself from the group. She denied having a role in a letter the group sent in 2006 opposing Alito's nomination to the Supreme Court and noted that she had, in fact, joined with fellow Yale Law School alumni in backing his confirmation. Barr, in an 11th-hour push to salvage Liu's nomination, spoke on the phone with Lee, a former Alito clerk, in a conversation that grew heated, according to people familiar with the call.

It is unclear how quickly the Trump administration will return to searching for a nominee to fill the associate attorney general slot.

Several people close to the administration said in interviews that the length and scrutiny of the Senate confirmation process—combined with a presidential election next year—would complicate any search process.

Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher partner Helgi Walker had been approached informally after Brand's resignation about the associate attorney general role, but she said she was not interested in the nomination at that time, according to people familiar with the search process.

Following Barr's nomination in December, Walker, a former clerk to Justice Clarence Thomas and now co-leader of Gibson Dunn's administrative law and regulatory practice group, was again approached about becoming associate attorney general, the sources said. But her answer was the same.

The Trump administration didn't look far to fill the deputy attorney general slot, **choosing (<https://www.law.com/nationallawjournal/2019/02/20/who-checks-the-fact-checker-what-to-know-about-jeffrey-rosen-trumps-deputy-ag-nominee/>)**

Jeffrey Rosen, a former Kirkland & Ellis partner in Washington who has been deputy secretary at the U.S. Transportation Department since 2017. Rosen was confirmed 56-42 for his current post.

Rosen's confirmation hearing for deputy attorney general hasn't been set.

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